

# Studying Israel



There is burgeoning interest worldwide in Israel as a serious field of academic study

Jan Jaben-Eilon Atlanta

**I**SRAEL HAS FINALLY ARRIVED. At an increasing number of North American and international universities, it's possible for students to focus on Israel studies. And students from all over the world, are signing up.

This isn't the image fashioned in the minds of most American Jews when the words "Israel" and "college campuses" are combined in the same sentence. For years, the Middle East conflict has pitted groups of opposing students with strident opinions against each other, often leaving Jewish youth caught in the middle with little background or knowledge to sort out the facts for themselves.

Yet earlier this year, the Berkeley Institute for Jewish Law and Israeli Law, Economy and Society was launched to expand Jewish and Israel studies on the Berkeley campus. An interdisciplinary initiative coordinated with a 15-member faculty advisory committee, the Berkeley Institute is designed to support academic discourse and scholarship on the study of Israel through course coordination, programming and research support.

Clearly excited by the flourishing programs on the Berkeley campus, law professor Kenneth A. Bamberger tells *The Report*, "One thing we know how to do well at Berkeley is to talk about controversial subjects. That's what academic institutions should be doing best."

The opening of the Institute reflects a national surge in the academic study of Israel. According to Ilan Troen, director of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University, until 2000, there were only five Israel studies programs in the US. That number has more than doubled, according to the website of the Association of Israel Studies (AIS), an international scholarly society devoted to the academic and professional

study of Israel. Outside the US and the Middle East, there are at least another half-dozen, with three Israel studies programs just in Moscow alone.

In mid-August, the Sichuan International Studies University in Chongqing, China, announced a new Israel studies program, offering undergraduate and graduate courses, extracurricular activities and options for study in Israel for the 2012 spring semester. "There is an intense curiosity in the world for what happens between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River," Troen tells *The Report*.

The growth of Israel studies programs in the US can be attributed to several factors. Russell A. Stone, professor emeritus in the Department of Sociology at American University in Washington DC, tells *The Report* that the 50th anniversary of Israel's independence in 1998, plus the outbreak of the second intifada spurred interest in academic programs focusing on Israel. Jewish donors also wanted to balance the university curricula focused on the Arab world that had flourished due to both the Israeli-Arab conflict and the economic impact of Arab oil on the Western world and provide a younger generation of American Jews with the knowledge necessary for rigorous discussions.

According to Kenneth W. Stein, director of Emory University's Institute for the Study of Modern Israel (ISMI), Israel studies programs "come in a moment in American Jewish history when American Jews are more acutely aware of what they don't know about Israel. There's fascination, curiosity and puzzlement and people of all political ilk want to know more," he tells *The Report*.

According to Ronald W. Zweig, professor of Israel studies at New York University's Taub Center for Israel Studies, at least some of the motivation behind the establishment of these

centers is the desire to counter the "hostile atmosphere about Israel" on various campuses. "The older generation grew up with a State of Israel in dramatic and heroic phases. It was not nearly as controversial as it is now. It was easy to love Israel then," he explains. "Now there are generations who see the long and seemingly never-ending conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. They see Israel subject to international criticism of the occupation and they don't understand their grandparents' enthusiasm for the state."

"I've heard that some students take classes to be able to respond to attack on campus," Saposnik tells *The Report*, "but I think, on one hand, taking a class [on Israel] sometimes complicates the picture they get. Some students have to struggle. They have to unlearn what they've heard. But it deepens their knowledge and, ultimately, gives them far better ways" to handle criticism of Israel.

Sharon Baradaran, president of the Y&S Nazarian Family Foundation, which funded the UCLA program with \$5 million, complains that "most money funneled toward campuses tends to overlook academic programs," and is directed more toward advocacy for Israel. "But the solutions don't lie in these organizations. What happens in the classroom where issues are addressed honestly" is key.

The Israel Studies programs and their courses are not specifically directed at Jewish students. Stone explains that academic programs that revolve around Israel "parallel other programs like Russian studies or Latin American studies, which are usually interdisciplinary programs."

In fact, as Troen points out, at the recent Summer Institute for Israel Studies (SIIS) at the Schusterman Center at Brandeis, the 24 students from around the world taking courses on



BRUCE COOK

**ISRAEL STUDIES: University of California, Berkeley law professor Kenneth A. Bamberger (at the podium): 'One thing we know how to do well at Berkeley is to talk about controversial subjects'**

Israel's society, history, politics, economics, culture, foreign affairs and diplomacy, included Yang Yang, associate professor and director of the Hebrew Program at Shanghai International Studies University and Julie Grimmeisen, a lecturer in Jewish-Islamic studies on the faculty of Jewish history and culture at the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich, Germany."

Zweig says Asian students are particularly interested in studying Israel. "They look to Israel as a model of a developing country," he explains. And Troen recalls that students in Turkey were interested in learning from the Israelis how Turkey could be both a Muslim state and a democracy.

**A**RIEH SAPOSNIK, DIRECTOR OF the Nazarian Center for Israel Studies at the University of California-Los Angeles, tells *The Report* that donors themselves provide some of the motivation for the establishment of these programs and adds, "I believe it also comes from academic interest by students. This has to do with the news. The Israel-Palestine conflict is very hot." Ideally, he says, students will develop an interest beyond the conflict and, in fact, all the Israel studies programs offer a variety of courses, including courses on Israeli film and literature.

Saposnik stresses that the courses on Israel at UCLA are academic studies, not *hasbara* (public relations). This is emphasized by Baradaran, whose own PhD is in the field of political science. "Our program goals are clearly academic, not ideological," she tells *The Report*. "The strongest mission of our center is... academic integrity. The most important feedback is that the classroom is a safe place. There's no question that can't be asked; everything is... looked at through an academic and analytical lens."

Similarly, Zweig tells *The Report* that the

Taub Center seeks "to provide an academic study of Israel as balanced and open to all perspectives without any political baggage. It is not to be involved with advocacy."

The Taub Center was launched in 2003, with a grant from the Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation, and is part of the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at NYU's Faculty of Arts and Science. The center offers a range of undergraduate and graduate courses on Israeli history and society, including Israel's economy and its film industry.

The granddaddy of Israel studies programs is Brandeis University. With a \$30 million endowment, it is the largest and best-endowed, according to Troen, who holds the Stoll Family Chair in Israel Studies there. Brandeis "has always had some courses on Israel," he says, but in 2007 the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies was formed to promote exemplary teaching and scholarship in Israeli history, politics, culture and society at Brandeis.

"This is only a portion of the funds available for Israel-related teaching and research at Brandeis," Troen adds. "There are other centers concerned with Israel, too, as well as various peace and co-existence programs, and even an initiative in the international business school. Unquestionably the catalyst for much of this came from the department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, which pioneered Jewish studies in the United States. The same department engaged in developing the study of Christianity and Islam in the Middle East."

Currently, Brandeis has three post-doctoral fellows and supports 13 Schusterman scholars whose research focuses on Israel, including an Armenian student researching the Armenian Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Brandeis's Summer Institute for Israel Studies (SIIS) brings faculty from universities throughout the world. Since 2004, more than 140 fellows have completed the program and have subsequently taught thousands of students with syllabi designed at SIIS. During the most recent session, participants attended seminars taught by Israel studies scholars and, while in Israel, met with representatives of Jewish and Arab communities. Troen says it's important to expose the SIIS fellows to opposing viewpoints. The fellows spent two days with Bedouins. Troen explained to the participants, before the Summer Institute session started, "Fellows will hear people complain that their villages are unrecognized. They will then hear Israeli officials argue that the villages are ille-

gal... We don't tell people what to think - who are we to tell them?"

That approach is basic to academic study, Troen adds. "Common sense and practice confirm that good academics... attempt to keep a balance between their own views and the demands of a scientific and objective approach to research and teaching."

Given the intensity of interest in one of the hottest regions of the world, it is not surprising that North American Israel studies programs are expanding their course offerings as well as increasing their degree programs. Last year, Berkeley only offered one undergraduate course, but this coming year, thanks to the Berkeley Institute and \$75,000 in seed money from The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation, it will offer five.

According to University of California, Berkeley's Bamberger, a constitutional and administrative law scholar who teaches courses in Jewish law and ethics, Berkeley is launching its first basic grounding history course, to be taught by five faculty members. In addition, there will be courses on the psychology of Israeli identity, psychology and religion, comparative constitutional law and Israeli music. For the first time, there will be a graduate level workshop in Israel studies, he adds. In February 2012, Berkeley will host a campus-wide conference on Israel as a high-tech nation led by professors in the economics department and business school.

Berkeley also has a history of hosting Israeli luminaries, such as former Israeli Supreme Court Justice Dalia Dorner for the launch event last April, who often teach courses in their field of study.

While many universities are bringing Israeli scholars to their campuses, there is also an increasing effort to train Americans to teach Israel in the US. Zweig says that the lack of faculty in the US was the impetus behind its doctoral program in Jewish studies and history, with a focus on Israel. "There's no doctorate of Israel studies because it isn't a discipline by itself, but a subset of either history or international relations or Jewish studies," he explains.

The Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies offers programs leading to a master's degree and PhD. Doctoral students earn a master's degree in the course of their studies. NYU has 12 PhD students in the program, including Israelis, Palestinians, French as well as Americans.

Currently, there's "advanced discussion" on

developing a PhD program in Jewish and Islamic studies with a focus on Israel. NYU does not yet have a masters program focusing on Israel, but Zweig says he hopes to go public with it within a year. Brandeis also has a large graduate program that has been producing people who can teach Israel studies elsewhere.

According to Troen, Zweig, and Saposnik, courses around the country are so oversubscribed that they must turn away students.

**I**T IS NOT JUST NORTH AMERICA THAT IS EXPERIENCING this surge. This summer Oxford University established a chair of Israel studies and placed it in St. Anne's College, a college in the division of social sciences.

Via e-mail correspondence, Colin Shindler, professor of Israel studies at the University of London, tells *The Report* that there's no way of knowing how many Israel studies programs there are in Europe. "Every day, we are discovering people who teach Israel studies in one form or another, from Lisbon to Moscow. Israel studies are even being taught in a number of Siberian universities."

The proliferation of these programs has several reasons, depending on the location, he explains. "In Germany and Poland, it's for historical reasons. In Western Europe, many students are heartily tired of the megaphone war and wish to explore the issues for themselves in the classroom – where freedom of expression reigns. Students wish to educate themselves about the uniqueness of Israel through study rather than through received wisdom. They are looking for intellectual honesty and factual accuracy. They look for sensible analyses and rational answers to questions."

Shindler explains that his lectures on Zionist ideology and on the Israel-Palestine conflict were so oversubscribed that he often had to locate larger rooms. "My students included Arabs, Israelis, Muslims and others from all sorts of backgrounds – Jews were always a distinct minority. Students who wish to educate themselves and think beyond slogans and sound bites are fascinated by this torturous conflict. Although I have views on the conflict, I strive for objectivity as far as possible. I teach complexity.... At the end of the day, students make up their own minds, based on an informed view."

About five years ago, Shindler attended his first Association of Israel Studies (AIS) conference, which led him to initiate the European Association of Israel Studies (EAIS), which will have its launch conference in mid-September. Calling himself the unelected chair of the EAIS, Schindler recalls that at the AIS Conference, "the participants were either North Americans or Israelis and I represented the entire British empire. It was this vacuum that propelled me to establish the EAIS."

"In November 2009, over 30 UK academics gathered at the University of London. It was clear that there was a real enthusiasm for forming an association. Many had never met their colleagues before. Similar meetings have been held in Paris and Milan."

In July, Brandeis hosted the 27th conference of the AIS, which was attended by 400 researchers from 14 countries. Stone tells *The Report* that the AIS and its annual conferences have grown steadily both as more Israeli academics have become involved and due to the "recognition that Israel is not getting the attention it deserves in Middle Eastern academic associations." AIS, he says, has been able to "broaden the scope of the academic papers presented and has provided an opportunity for young scholars to get the experience of giving papers." Furthermore, he adds, more Israeli archives are open and there is now "a massive body of records available."

All of which means that more serious research – the core of academia – is possible, heightening the interest in and deepening the understanding of Israel as an academically interesting country, not unlike China, Russia, or Canada. ●



EVERY SO OFTEN: Eliezer Yaari

## Changing the World

**E**VERY SO OFTEN, I THINK ABOUT WRITING TO you, my good friend in America. After all, it was in the US that I studied basic economics, and there was something very purifying in finally understanding the connection between the demand and the supply and the magic point of their intersection.

In Professor Edith Stokey's classes at the Kennedy School of Government, we were not allowed to use a number larger than 10: "The numbers are not really important, it's the principles that matter," she said, and so even a stubborn old Jew like me could learn the principles of economic policy – and actually begin to fall in love with them.

"Don't look at demand axis as just another line," she would tell us. "You should always draw people on that line, real people that you can identify. Think about who can bring in the goods and who can't. And think about their fate in the system."

At the time, I didn't really believe in what I was hearing, but during our course summary, as the distance between teacher and students broke down a bit, Stokey shared her personal ethos about economics and the fate of people. "There are three keys to success," she told us, "who your parents are, where you were born, and all the rest is luck. A lot of luck."

Sadly, I could only agree. My luck dated even further back: the fact that I was born to two Holocaust survivors is a form of exponential luck. This luck defined me well before I allowed my parents to influence my life too much, well before I entered the work force.

My parents managed to survive, but with regard to economics – how should I say this delicately – they weren't particularly brilliant. They believed in mutual responsibility and modest consumption and they died convinced that with hard work you could achieve something. And they did succeed. At working hard, that is.

Every so often, I think that I really should write to you my friends and brothers and sisters in America. I think it's time that we talk about economics. Let's talk about Stokey's ideas, with numbers that are never greater than 10. After all, none of us are great financial wizards. Our understanding of world finances can be summed up these days in one word.

Fear.

**T**HESE PAST FEW MONTHS HAVE BEEN VERY DIFFICULT for all of us. We've come to the painful recognition that we did not make enough of a determined effort to ensure that luck would remain on our side. Or, to put it more bluntly, we handed control over our fate to chance. And now it's time to pay up.

It began back in 2008, but soon our brokers were back to convincing us that we had recouped our losses and that the future was looking rosy. We, heavy gamblers that we are, believed them as they pocketed their scandalous bonus.

But now it's August 2011. Peering through our dark dreams we see that the financial markets are burning and social unrest is